

N. B. FORREST - AN INTERVIEW WITH THE REBEL CAVALRYMAN

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An Interview with the Rebel Cavalryman—He Thinks He Could Raise 40,000 Men in Five Days—Half a Million Kuklux in the South.

Correspondence of the Cincinnati Commercial.

MEMPHIS, Tenn., Friday, Aug. 28, 1868,

To-day I have enjoyed "big talks" enough to have gratified any of the famous Indian chiefs who have been treating with Gen. SHERMAN for the past two years. First I met Gen. N. B. FORREST, then Gen. GIDEON J. PILLOW, and Gov. ISHAM G. HARRIS. My first visit was to Gen. FORREST, whom I found at his office at 8 o'clock this morning, hard at work, although complaining of an illness contracted at the New-York Convention. The New-Yorkers must be a hard set indeed, for I have not met a single delegate from the Southern States who has not been ill ever since he went there. But to Gen. FORREST. Now that the Southern people have elevated him to the position of their great leader and oracle, it may not be amiss to preface my conversation with him with a brief sketch of the gentleman.

I cannot better personally describe him than by borrowing the language of one of his biographers. "In person, he is six feet one inch and a half in height, with broad shoulders, a full chest, and symmetrical, muscular limbs; erect in carriage, and weighs one hundred and eighty-five pounds; dark gray eyes, dark hair, mustache, and beard worn upon the chin, a set of regular white teeth and clearly cut features;" which, altogether, make him a rather handsome man for one forty-seven years of age. Previous to the war, in 1852, he left the business of planter, and came to this city and engaged in the business of "negro trader," in which traffic he seems to have been quite successful, for, by 1861, he had become the owner of two plantations a few miles below here, in Mississ'ppi, on which he produced about a thousand bales of cotton each year, in the meantime carrying on the negro trading. In June, 1861, he was authorized by Gov. HARRIS to recruit a regiment of cavalry for the war, which he did, and which was the nucleus around which he gathered the army which he commanded as a Lieutenant-General at the end of the war.

After being seated in his office, I said:

"Gen. FORREST, I come especially to learn civil and political affairs in the State of Tennessee, and the South generally. I desire them for publication in the Cincinnati Commercial. I do not wish to misrepresent you in the slightest degree, and therefore only ask for such views as you are willing I should publish."

"I have not now," he replied, "and never had any opinion on any public or political subject which I would object to having published. I mean what I say, honestly and earnestly, and only object to being misrepresented. I dislike to be placed before the country in a false position, especially as I have not sought the reputation which I have gained."

I replied: "Sir, I will publish only what you say, and then you cannot possibly be misrepresented. Our people desire to know your feeling toward the General Government, the State Government of Tennessee, the Radical Party, both in and out of the State, and upon the question of negro suffrage."

"Well, Sir," said he, "when I surrendered my seven thousand men in 1865, I accepted a parole, honestly, and have observed it faithfully up to today. I have counseled peace in all the speeches I have made. I have advised my people to submit to the laws of the State, oppressive as they are, and unconstitutional as I believe them to be. I was paroled and not pardoned until the issuance of the last proclamation of general amnesty, and therefore did not think it prudent for me to take any active part until the oppression of my people became so great that they could not endure it, and then I would be with them. My friends thought differently, and sent me to New-York, and I am glad that I went there."

"Then, I suppose, General, that you think the oppression has become so great that your people should not longer bear it?"

"No," he answered; "it is growing worse hourly, yet I have said to the people, stand fast, let us try to right the wrong by legislation. A few weeks ago I was called to Nashville to consult with other gentlemen who had been prominently identified with the cause of the Confederacy, and we then offered pledges which we thought would be satisfactory to Mr. BROWNLOW and his Legislature, and we told them that, if they would not call out the militia, we would agree to preserve order and see that the laws were enforced. The Legislative Committee certainly led me to believe that our proposition would be accepted, and no militia organized. Believing this, I came home, and advised all of my people to remain peaceful, and offer no resistance to any reasonable law. It is true that I have never recognized the present Government in Tennessee as having any legal existence, yet I was willing to submit to it for a time, with the hope that the wrongs might be righted peacefully."

"What are your feelings toward the Federal Government, General?"

"I loved the old Government in 1861, I love the old Constitution yet. I think it is the best Government in the world, if administered as it was before the war. I do not hate it; I am opposing now only the Radical revolutionaries who are trying to destroy it. I believe that party to be composed, as I know it is in Tennessee, of the worst men on God's earth—men who would hesitate at no crime, and who have only one object in view, to enrich themselves."

"In the event of Gov. BROWNLOW's calling out the militia—do you think there will be any resistance offered to their acts?" I asked.

"That will depend upon circumstances. If the militia are simply called out, and do not interfere with or molest any one, I do not think there will be any fight. If, on the contrary, they do what I believe they will do, commit outrages, or even one outrage, upon the people, they and Mr. BROWNLOW's government will be swept out of existence; not a Radical will be left alive. If the militia are called out, we cannot but look upon it as a declaration of war, because Mr. BROWNLOW has already issued his proclamation directing them to shoot down the Kuklux wherever they find them, and he calls all Southern men Kuklux."

"Why, General, we people up North have regarded the Kuklux Klan as an organization which exists only in the frightened imaginations of a few politicians."

"Well, Sir, there is such an organization, not only in Tennessee, but all over the South, and its numbers have not been exaggerated."

"What are its numbers, General?"

"In Tennessee there are over 40,000; in all the Southern States they number about 550,000 men."

"What is the character of the organization, may I inquire?"

"Yes, Sir. It is a protective, political, military organization. I am willing to show any man the constitution of the society. The members are sworn to recognize the Government of the United States. It does not say anything at all about the Government of the State of Tennessee. Its objects originally were protection against Loyal Leaguers and the Grand Army of the Republic, but after it became general it was found that political matters and interests could best be promoted within it, and it was then made a political organization, giving its support, of course, to the Democratic Party."

"But is the organization connected throughout the State?"

"Yes, it is. In each voting precinct there is a Captain, who, in addition to his other duties, is required to make out a list of names of men in his precinct, giving all the Radicals and all the Democrats who are positively known, and showing also the doubtful on both sides of both colors. This list of names is forwarded to the Grand Commander of the State, who is thus enabled to know who are our friends and who are not."

"Can you, or are you at liberty to give me the name of the commanding officer of this State?"

"No, it would be impolitic."

"Then I suppose that there can be no doubt of a conflict if the militia interfere with the people; is that your view?"

"Yes, Sir; if they attempt to carry out Gov. BROWNLOW's proclamation, by shooting down Kuklux—for he calls all Southern men Kuklux—if they go to hunting down and shooting these men, there will be war, and a bloodier one than we have ever witnessed. I have told these Radicals here what they might expect in such an event. I have no power to burn killing negroes. I intend to kill the Radicals, I have told them this and more; there is not a Radical leader in this town but is a marked man, and if a trouble should break out, not one of them would be left alive. I have told them that they were trying to create a disturbance and then slip out and leave the consequences to fall upon the negro, but they can't do it. Their houses are picketed, and when the fight comes, not one of them would ever get out of the town alive. We don't intend they shall ever get out of the country. But I want it distinctly understood, that I am opposed to any war, and will only fight in self-defense. If the militia attack us, we will resist to the last, and if necessary, I think I could raise 40,000 men, in five days, ready for the field."

"Do you think, General, that the Kuklux have been of any benefit to the State?"

"No doubt of it. Since its organization the Leagues have quit killing and murdering people. There were some foolish young men who put masks on their faces and rode over the country, frightening negroes; but orders have been issued to stop that, and it has ceased. You may say further, that three members of the Kuklux have been court-martialed and shot for violations of the orders not to disturb or molest people."

"Are you a member of the Kuklux, General?"

"I am not; but am in sympathy and will cooperate with them. I know that they are charged with many crimes that they are not guilty of. A case in point is the killing of BIERFIELD, at Franklin, a few days ago. I sent a man up there especially to investigate the case, and report to me, and I have his letter here now, in which he states that they had nothing to do with it as an organization."

"What do you think of negro suffrage?"

"I am opposed to it under any and all circumstances; and in our Convention urged our party not to commit themselves at all upon the subject. If the negroes vote to enfranchise us, I do not think I would favor their disfranchisement. We will stand by those who help us. And here I want you to understand distinctly, I am not an enemy to the negro. We want him here, and we are the only governing class we

have, and more than that, I would sooner trust him than the white scalawag or carpet-bagger. When I entered the army I took forty-seven negroes into the army with me, and forty-five of them were surrendered with me. I said to them at the start: "This fight is against slavery; if we lose it, you will be made free; if we win the fight, and you stay with me and be good boys, I will set you free. In either case you will be free." Those boys stayed with me, drove my teams, and better Confederates did not live."

"Do you think the Kuklux will try to intimidate the negroes at the election?"

"I do not think they will. Why, I made a speech at Brownsville the other day, and while there a Lieutenant, who served with me, came to me and informed me that a band of Radicals had been going through the country claiming to be Kuklux, and disarming the negroes, and then selling their arms. I told him to have the matter investigated, and, if true, to have the parties arrested."

"What do you think is the effect of the amnesty granted to your people?"

"I believe that the amnesty restored all the rights to the people, full and complete. I do not think that the Federal Government has the right to disfranchise any man, but I believe the Legislatures of the States have. The objection I have to the disfranchisement in Tennessee is, that the Legislature which enacted the law had no constitutional existence, and the law, in itself, is a nullity. Still I would respect it until changed by law; but there is a limit beyond which men cannot be driven, and I am ready to die sooner than sacrifice my honor. This thing must have an end, and it is now about time for that end to come."

"What do you think of Gen. GRANT?" I asked.

"I regard him as a great military commander, a good man, honest and liberal, and if elected will, I hope and believe, execute the laws honestly and faithfully. And, by the way, a report has been published in some of the papers, stating that while Gen. GRANT and lady were at Corinth in 1862, they took and carried off furniture and other property. I here brand the author as a liar. I was at Corinth only a short time ago, and I personally investigated the whole matter, talked with the people with whom he and his lady lived while there, and they saw that their conduct was everything that could have been expected of a gentleman and lady, and deserving the highest praise. I am opposed to Gen. GRANT in everything, but I would do him justice."

The foregoing is the principal part of my conversation with the General. I give the conversation, and leave the reader to form his own opinion as to what Gen. FORREST means to do. I think that he has been so plain in his talk that it cannot be misunderstood.